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SUBJECT: REMOTE COMMUNITY COLLEGES CATER TO LOCAL NEEDS

¶1. Summary: Two community colleges set up four years ago with US assistance in the northern Thai border province of Mae Hong Song are using the region's religious and ethnic diversity as teaching tools. Located in a poor and remote province on the Burma border, both colleges are run by civic boosters who see future development as dependent on a better-trained population.  
End summary

¶2. During an April 25-26 visit to the town of Mae Sariang near the Thai-Burma border, the Consul General met with board members of the community college in the small library of the local mosque, a 150-year-old institution that also functions as a community learning center. Imam Suriya Aramvong, recently approved for an International Visitor grant, serves as a guest teacher at the college. As part of a course on Society and Ethics, Suriya hosts students at the mosque to explain Islam and answer their questions. Many ask about perceptions of Islam as a violent religion, Suriya explained, noting that he welcomes all questions. Students also visit the local Christian church and Buddhist temple as part of the course.

¶3. The Mae Sariang community college and another in the provincial capital of Mae Hong Song were among the first ten established about four years ago under a Ministry of Education initiative supported by the Department of State and Department of Education. After finishing the two-year course from the community college, graduates have gone on to further studies through Chiang Mai's Mae Jo University or Rajabhat University. Except for these universities' satellite classes, the two community colleges are the only post-secondary school institutions in the province.

¶4. Students in Mae Sariang pay 25 baht (70 cents) per credit hour. To further keep education affordable, no uniforms are required. Classes are held at a local primary school on Saturdays and Sundays; teachers, mostly retired academics, are unpaid volunteers. Many of the 353 students come from hill tribe communities in the surrounding mountains; often the whole family comes to the weekend classes. According to proud members of the board, the classes offered by the college have made dramatic improvements in the administrative skills of several local officials.

¶5. The Mae Hong Son community college, four hours up a mountainous road from Mae Sariang, has 400 students and a USAID-funded/Public Affairs-supported self-access English learning center. With tourism growing as a source of revenue for the region, the Mae Hong Son college is run by local business people eager to develop the tourism industry. The retired academics on the Mae Sariang board, in contrast, have chosen to focus on local government and pre-school education, explaining that tourism has not yet "boomed" in this more remote location. .

¶6. Comment: Located in a remote, mountainous region inhabited mainly by hill tribe groups and home to a number of refugee camps, these two Mae Hong Son communities are impressively enthusiastic about the opportunities offered by their tiny colleges. Largely ignored by Bangkok, with poorly funded schools, they have embraced the concept of local empowerment and shaped the colleges to the needs of their own populations.

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